

9 June 1967

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Dear Alastair:

I was very pleased to get your letter inviting me to speak at your annual conference. It arrived just as I was leaving Saigon for the States; I am now spending a month or two in Europe, enroute to the State Department, in Washington, and then proceeding to rejoin The RAND Corporation in Santa Monica. At this moment I am not too far from you, in Paris, but this is being dictated to a secretary at The RAND Corporation via tape, so it is coming a rather long route to you and I hope you will forgive any roughnesses that may result from my inability to oversee the final product. I am leaving Paris this morning for several weeks in Spain and the Riveria, but I may well end up in London for a week or two either at the end of June or in the middle of July. (I am scheduled to talk on Vietnam to our mission in Stockholm on the 5th and 6th of July, and at this point I am not sure whether I will get to London before or after that.) I will certainly try to look you up if you are in London when I am there. I will probably be back in Santa Monica at the end of July or early in August.

I have always wanted to attend a convention of the ISS, and I should like very much to be present at this one. I see no obstacle in timing, and I suspect that Rand would be agreeable. However, I must confess to very strong misgivings in connection with the subject you have suggested that I speak on, though I realize that it is in keeping with the theme of your overall conference. After two years in Vietnam, the very thought of focusing one's attention upon the factor of technology in this sort of war -- either from the point of view of the insurgents or of the counterinsurgents -- evokes a rather emotional reaction from me that belies your kind words on my objectivity. I am not sure that I could bring myself, even for the purposes of your conference, to devote a talk on Vietnam primarily to the subject of technology, since I have come to feel so strongly that hardware in that war has played and will

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continue to play a trivial role in comparison to such factors as strategic understanding, leadership, political aims and cohesiveness, administration, and morale. (Incidentally, I would expect these latter factors to continue to be the most salient ones in conflicts of this sort in the future, in some contrast to the Malaysian conflict, where British political authority, understanding, and administration, played a direct role and were, I suspect, of critical importance in seeing that the chosen strategy was carried out effectively.)

It so happens that in 1961 I spent several months during the summer and early fall as a member of a small team (mainly physical scientists, including Bill Shockley, one of the inventors of the transistor, and Luis Alvarez, the inventor of the original detonation system for the Atom Bomb, and another man who had invented the Sidewinder missile: all gifted in technology, in other words, though not in counter-insurgency) known as the "task force on limited war research and development." Our immediate mission was to decide how to spend a large DoD budget on R & D for limited wars, and in the course of our work we made visits to the Philippines, Vietnam and Thailand. Most of the gadgets the Services proposed to us then are just now coming into use, six years later; but the truly important thing is that they wouldn't have made any difference in Vietnam if they had been available then, and they are not going to make any difference now.

As I say this, I'm reminded of one incident during our visit to Thailand, which followed our stay in Vietnam. Our small group met with our Ambassador in Thailand and his immediate staff. The Ambassador began with some remarks -- either naive or disingenuous -- on how glad he was to see us there, "because so many people come to these problems and show an interest only in gadgetry." He was sure, he said, that this group was not making a mistake of thinking that gadgetry was of crucial importance. This ended his introductory remarks, and there was a short silence, after which our leader Luis Alvarez, cleared his throat and launched into a discussion of the gadget that had become his obsession in Vietnam: "We think that it's possible to turn night into day...by these image intensification devices... this is what is needed in fighting guerrillas..." Alvarez's enthusiasm for this gadget -- which has finally come into use in Vietnam this year -- was so irrepressible that the concentration was more ludicrous than I may have conveyed. It was an embarrassing moment, though a rather funny one at the time, but in retrospect it is more embarrassing to me now and not very funny. Alvarez, as a nuclear physicist new to the processes of violent politics that constitute guerrilla and counter guerrilla war, could be excused for believing that a device that would "turn night into day" for government troops patrolling at night would be of critical importance in Vietnam; it is less easy to excuse the U. S. government, which should over the ensuing six years have at some point come to realize that the problem was to get the government troops away from their families

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in district towns onto night patrol at all. The actual fact, of course, is that the Vietcong have the countryside pretty much to themselves at night, and the GVN inactivity at night (shared to a surprising degree by U. S. units) is not critically for lack of image intensification devices.

I'm also reminded of an anecdote that my boss, Ed Lansdale, with whom I volunteered to go to Vietnam two years ago, told me about one of his early discussions with McNamara in 1961. Lansdale was then Special Assistant to the Secretary of Defense for covert operations and counter-guerrilla warfare, and McNamara had specified the same subject that you did, technological consideration in guerrilla warfare. Lansdale showed up with an armful of very dusty old weapons, which he laid on the table. He then described that the kind of war "our side" was then carrying on in Vietnam with our help and advice: a war involving jet planes, tanks, artillery and armored personnel carriers, the latest in our conventional equipment. McNamara's attention, meanwhile, was drawn to the pile of obsolete small arms on the table; he asked what they were. Lansdale told him they were homemade knives, homemade grenades and mines, and old french weapons that had been captured by the guerrillas ten years earlier. "These are the only weapons we're facing" Lansdale told him. "They're carried by very short men, who wear black pajamas or ragged shorts, and sandals cut from old rubber tires. That's all they have to fight with. They're kicking the shit out of us."

Nothing much has changed in the six years. Their weapons are a little better, and ours are a lot better, and we have a lot more of them; but we are further from success in Vietnam than we were in 1961. And our continued over reliance on technology and our ignorance and neglect of political elements, has been a major factor in our failures and impotence.

None of this, I'm afraid, is too much in the spirit of your proposed subject. As you can see, my heart would scarcely be in it. I would be much happier speaking in a critical role in relation to the functions of new technology in this sort of warfare, and if there is indeed a place in your conference for such a speaker I could be much more specific and analytical than I have time for here. In any case, I would very much like to participate in your conference and perhaps it will be possible to do so in some fashion, as a listener if not as a speaker or commentator. And I look forward to an unfettered discussion on Vietnam -- and other subjects -- with you in London if we can get together in the next month or so.

Yours Sincerely,

Daniel Ellsberg

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